

Roundabout Theatre Company

**MOLLY
SWEENEY**

Family Series Study Guide

MOLLY SWEENEY

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Contents

**ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT:
BRIAN FRIEL**

**CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS
ON SEEING**

GLOSSARY

WHAT IS A METAPHOR?

by John McEneny

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: BRIAN FRIEL

Brian Friel was born in the town of Omagh, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland in 1929. As his father before him, the young Mr. Friel went into the teaching profession, and at the age of 25, he married Anne Morrison, a girl he had known since he was sixteen. It was in the early 1950's that Mr. Friel began writing short stories for the *NEW YORKER* magazine and in the late 50's radio plays for the BBC. It was not until approximately 1960 that Mr. Friel gave up teaching to become a full time writer. In 1964 he had his first great success as a playwright, and that was with the play *PHILADELPHIA, HERE I COME!*

PHILADELPHIA, HERE I COME! was written after Mr. Friel had lived for six months in Minneapolis in 1963, observing the creation of the now world-famous Guthrie Theatre. Tyrone Guthrie, a friend of Mr. Friel and also from Ireland, had invited Mr. Friel to witness the implementation of Mr. Guthrie's new ideas about how theatre should be presented. Mr. Friel returned to Ireland with his own new and enthusiastic vision of theatre. Since that time, Mr. Friel has continued to write and find great success in the theatre with such plays as *THE LOVES OF CASS MCGUIRE*, *THE FREEDOM OF THE CITY*, *VOLUNTEERS*, *ARISTOCRATS* and *DANCING AT LUGHNASA*.

Brian Friel is not only considered one of Ireland's greatest living playwrights, he is considered one of the greatest of English speaking playwrights.

Mrs. Friel is the first person to see any of Mr. Friel's plays after they are written. She reports that her husband will not change a word for anyone, not even for her. According to Brian Friel, the script for a play is the same as the musical score for a symphony. Would the composer change a musical passage because the flute player was having a problem with it? No! On the same principle, a playwright should not be asked to change dialogue because an actor finds it difficult. Mr. Friel believes it is the job of the actor to find a way to solve his problem without changing the work of the writer.

Mr. Friel has lived almost all of his life within a fifty-mile radius of where he was born. He and his wife raised their five children within this area and he cannot imagine living anywhere else. Mr. Friel is a very slow typist, so he tends to write all of his plays by hand, just as writers have done for centuries past. In many ways a confirmed traditionalist, Brian Friel is sometimes so old-fashioned that his ideas seem revolutionary. Until relatively recent times (within the last 100 years), plays were directed by the stage manager or leading actor of the troupe. There was no such thing as a stage director. Based on this fact, Mr. Friel questions the necessity for directors. He feels that if the writer has done his job properly, the actors will understand what they must do on stage. Given this attitude, it is even more exciting to consider the fact that Mr. Friel has served as both playwright and director for this production of *MOLLY SWEENEY*.

It is also interesting to know, considering his attachment to the old ways of doing things, that almost all of Mr. Friel's plays are concerned with breaking from the accepted ways of doing and/or looking at things. Mr. Friel's entire life has been

steeped in tradition, yet his plays cry to his audience about traditions that have stifled and crushed the individual. He has also written about the loss of tradition and how that loss destroys the structure that supports life.

Mr. Friel's plays are concerned with the nature of being in exile. Characters find themselves set apart from the world in which they grew up, by time, by outlook, by ambition, by disappointment, and for Molly Sweeney, by a medical procedure. These characters will sometimes further banish themselves by traveling far away to Africa, to Philadelphia, or even to a place deep inside their own heads.

Mr. Friel believes that you don't have to be physically exiled from your home to understand what exile feels like on an emotional level. He understands the pain of being trapped and choked by traditions, just as he understands how supportive those traditions can be to getting through the day without fear. We are all comforted by the ways that are familiar to us, and at the same time, we may also want to escape from having to repeat those ways forever.

Perhaps this is why Mr. Friel's writing has become so popular in Europe, America and England, as well as Ireland. Although he writes almost exclusively about a small mythical Irish town called Ballybeg, the human dilemmas Mr. Friel dramatizes are universal. (Ballybeg, or baile beag as it is said in Gaelic, means small town.) Mr. Friel is very clearly writing about the characters and issues of *Small Town, Anywhere You Come From in the World*, even if it is a small town in a big city.

His plays inspire audiences to consider the larger social issues reflected in individual human dilemmas. He offers a com-

passionate picture of individuals who have accepted the traditional way of doing things, the pain that can accompany that acceptance, as well as the pain that comes with making way for the new. Molly Sweeney experienced her greatest pain when she made way for the new, and virtually lost the world she had known since childhood.

Despite great success in the world of theatre, Mr. Friel has almost exclusively refused to allow his plays to be made into movies. He has almost as much distrust of filmmakers as he does of politicians. This is the basis for two other contradictions in Mr. Friel's life. In 1987, Mr. Friel was appointed to and agreed to serve in the Irish Senate. But according to a colleague also in politics, Mr. Friel attended sessions rarely, and when he did, almost always remained silent. Despite his distrust of filmmakers, Mr. Friel has allowed just one of his plays to be adapted to the screen because he so admired the work of the director.

In 1980, Mr. Friel, along with Stephen Rea (an Irish actor who became world famous for his lead in the movie *THE CRYING GAME*), founded a small theatre called *FIELD DAY*. It is at this theatre that all of Mr. Friel's plays have their premieres. *FIELD DAY* tours its productions to small towns all over the north and south of Ireland. In addition, *FIELD DAY* publishes the work of writers from all over the world on subjects having to do with modern day problems and conflicts.

When asked what theatre means to him Mr. Friel has replied, "What has the theatre meant to me? I see the theatre as a neighborhood pub where the truth can be spoken." For those of us who live in the United States, "neighborhood pub" might be translated to mean our local club

house where we feel comfortable and important. It should be a place where we feel that our thoughts and ideas are important. We hope that you can feel this way about your relationship with Roundabout.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

MOLLY SWEENEY: At the beginning of the play she is 41 years old. She lost her vision at the age of ten months but has never in her life felt sorry for herself. Having always lived in Donegal, Ireland, Molly is married, has many friends, bikes everywhere, swims, dances and, in general, enjoys a very full and active life. She is a well respected masseuse at the local health spa run by her friend Rita Cairnes. It was at the spa that Molly and her husband of three years, Frank, first met. It is Frank, and not Molly, who feels the great need for the operation to restore Molly's vision. Molly considers her life just fine the way it is, but she is happy to go along with Frank's project if it makes him happy. Before the operation, Molly projects a calm, inner peace that Mr. Rice envies. She seems to understand herself and her world so well and to feel completely secure within its borders.

FRANK SWEENEY: Now in his mid-forties, Molly's husband Frank is a man dedicated to causes. In fact, his life is a catalog of good causes, each of which he champions for one, two or three years. He did volunteer relief work in Nigeria, sold batteries for solar powered windmills and spent three winters in Norway protecting the whales. Frank becomes obsessed with his causes, reading widely on each issue until he feels that he is an

expert on the subject. In a frightening way, Molly has become one of his causes. Although he loves her, he doesn't seem able to empathize with her situation. He assumes that vision will improve her life. He never considers the chance he is taking with changing the delicate balance of someone else's existence. Frank is a good man, even though he is not a deep thinker.

MR. RICE: He arrived to work in the hospital in Donegal already in his mid to late forties. In his youth, he felt that he could and would conquer the world. His skill as an eye surgeon was well known, and he was part of a group of young researchers who studied with the great practitioners in their field all over the globe.

He was so engrossed in his work and in the glory it could bring that he neglected his marriage and his wife. When his wife left him for a colleague, Roger Bloomstein, Rice was devastated. He was completely unaware that his entire existence had been based on his relationship to Maria, his wife, and without her, there was no reason to continue. It was as if Maria's departure changed the definition of everything in Rice's life, and he could not manage the burden of redefinition. Rice withdrew from the jetset world of new surgical eye techniques to the backwaters of small town medicine where he could just manage to keep himself going from day to day. He and Molly respond in very similar ways to having their worlds shattered.

ON SEEING

During the last millennium, there have been just over twenty documented cases of individuals who have regained their sight after a near lifetime of blindness. The emotional ramifications of this experience are just beginning to enter the annals of psychology.

We who have sight take for granted our ability to complete a visual image that is only partially represented, interpret an image that is fuzzy, organize an image that has been scrambled, or discern an image that has been camouflaged.

Each of these tasks represents a host of complex processes based on a lifetime of storing and interpreting visual information. Our brains have developed physical pathways through which we process visual information. Our storehouse of information allows us to distinguish the difference between a tree and its reflection in a lake, to ignore our own nose as it intrudes into everything we look at and to understand that as an object moves away from us it is not actually shrinking in size just because it appears to be getting smaller.

During infancy, when we begin to create the neural pathways that connect our storehouse of information with the images that are newly transmitted, the process is relatively smooth. All the brain's pathways are free and available for dedication. By adulthood, the brain has set its pathway system and re-dedicating those lines is extremely difficult.

Images that play tricks on our eyes and brains are commonly used in parlor games, school lessons and university lectures. But

what if every time a person opened his or her eyes the world seemed to be one large visual trick or illusion? Living in such a world could easily drive one mad or into a serious depression.

Approximately sixty percent (60%) of the human brain is devoted to interpreting visual data. When the eyes do not function, and the brain therefore does not have visual data to interpret, it is theorized that these portions of the brain are then retooled for use in interpreting alternate sensory information. When vision is restored, the brain has to re-organize the manner in which the vision centers function.

In compensating for the absence of visual information, the brain develops an alternate "image" of the world. If vision is restored, the effect is similar to that of a tidal wave hitting a well-organized office. Accessing and re-labeling old information becomes difficult because the new information renders everything formerly understood to represent reality unrecognizable. It is equally difficult to store new information when it conflicts so painfully with the old perceptions. The confusion is inescapable unless the patient closes his or her eyes or retreats into a world where what is seen is not absorbed.

Ironically, seeing, and interpreting what one sees in unique ways is the skill of an artist. It is not uncommon for artists to suffer because of their idiosyncratic perception of the world. MOLLY SWEENEY was inspired by Brian Friel's fascination with an actual case study in which a man, blind since infancy, regains partial vision in adulthood.

The parallels between creating art, seeing and interpreting the world in a different way from most of the population, and the

position in which this man found himself, are many. What does it mean to "see" something the way other people see? How can artists help others to see old things in new ways, to open their eyes, as it were? When does a clinical drawing sample become a painting, or a case study a play? How can we tell what is real, what is made up, what is art and what is data?

GLOSSARY

It's always interesting to see how many of these words one recognizes and how many require some explanation. Try looking down the list of words without looking at the definitions and count how many you already know.

ebullient - the quality of expressing feelings or ideas in an enthusiastic and lively manner. Frank Sweeney is described by both Molly and Mr. Rice as being ebullient.

engram - the ability of the brain to interpret what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted and felt, to create a mental context for the object or item. If one of the senses is missing then the mental image, or engram, is created without that information. Molly Sweeney is forced to alter all of her mental images, engrams, when she regains her sight.

tactile - perceptible to the sense of touch. Before she regains her sight, Molly's world depends largely in the sense of touch.

agnosticism - the belief that absolute truth does not exist but that what we perceive through our senses is the closest we can come to exact knowledge of the universe.

pompous - an exaggerated show of dignity or self-importance.

retina - a delicate multilayered light sensitive membrane lining the inner eyeball, connected by the optic nerve to the brain. The retinas in both Molly's eyes were severely damaged causing her restored vision to have blotches and holes.

cataract - a dense film that covers the capsule of the eye, causing partial or full blindness.

cornea - the transparent, convex, front portion of the outer fibrous layer of the eyeball that covers the iris and the pupil. Molly's corneas were no longer transparent and thus caused her to be blind.

atrophy - the wasting away of living tissue and/or organs.

hubris - excessive pride.

candor - frankness or sincerity of expression; openness. Molly is often described as someone who speaks with candor.

luminous - to emit light, to glow. Both Frank and Mr. Rice thought Molly luminous.

Venus - the Roman goddess of love and beauty.

Galataea - a Greek myth in which a statue of a beautiful woman is brought to life by the goddess Aphrodite in answer to the wish of the sculptor, Pygmalion. Mr. Rice likens himself to the character of Pygmalion and compares Molly to the statue, Galataea, as the woman to whom he helped give new life.

Icarus - a Greek myth about a young man, Icarus, who escapes from a prison in Crete by flying over the walls with wings built for him by his father Daedalus. Daedalus warns Icarus that he must not fly too close to the sun but the boy ignores his father's instructions and foolishly tests his freedom too far. The wax holding the wings together melts and Icarus is plunged into the sea where he drowns. Mr. Rice's ex-wife felt that he was like the character of Icarus, that he flew too high and would surely destroy himself.

laconic - to use very few words to express an idea or convey a thought.

heady - to become dizzy.

buoyant - the ability to recover quickly from difficult situations.

maelstrom - a whirlpool of tremendous size and/or violence.

sonar - a system using transmitted and reflected acoustic (sound) waves to detect and locate submerged objects. Frank describes Molly's ability to move about in the world as sonar-like.

proficient - to perform a job with expert correctness.

gnosis - is the intuitive perception of spiritual truths.

blindsight - when the eye can see but the brain does not register a response to the information being received.

chameleon - a type of lizard characterized by its ability to change colors according to its surroundings. Mr. Rice remembers his wife's beauty as chameleon-like.

WHAT IS A METAPHOR?

by John McEneny

Sometimes artists and playwrights can be pretty tricky. They won't come out and tell you the meaning of their work. They'll slip in little clues for you to decipher and make you work to find out what the play or work of art might really be about. These clues are called metaphors. A metaphor is something seemingly simple that an artist or playwright will put into his or her work that will serve as a clue to a deeper meaning.

For instance, a dove can be a sign for peace or the color red can signal danger. Now, of course, a dove can mean much as any other bird, and red doesn't have to mean anything, but artists place these symbols into their creations in such a way that it is fascinating to consider the alternate interpretations of their presence. For example, if we see a play in which a dove lands on a dying man's chest, what can we conclude? Perhaps that the dying man has found peace. Part of the fun is that we have a puzzle to solve, and it has more than one solution that works. Metaphors can be found in music, paintings, sculpture, television and films. What do you think the creators of the movies *SEVEN* and *BLADE RUNNER* intended the audience to think when they decided that the futuristic worlds in their movies would be ones in which it was always raining?

We have to remember when we watch a movie, a play, or even listen to a song lyric, that everything included is by choice and design. Nothing is random. Sometimes an artist may not realize why he or she has included a particular detail, but if it's in the work then the audience is free to interpret

its meaning in a multitude of different ways. In fact, it's our job, as the audience, to play detective and put all of our clues together to find the larger message of the work of art.

Consider *MOLLY SWEENEY*. If we look at the story on a simple level, it's about a blind woman and her husband and the doctor who helps her regain her sight. But if we really think about it, the story can mean a great deal more. Being blind is not just a physical problem, and Brian Friel, the playwright, plays with the nature of emotional and intellectual blindness throughout the story.

Mr. Rice, the doctor who operates on Molly's eyes, has been suffering from an extreme case of depression when he meets Molly and her husband. This depression began years before when his wife left him for one of his best friends, a fellow named Roger Bloomstein. In a discussion about his wife, Roger tells Rice that he (Rice) doesn't really appreciate his wife's beauty. Roger is really telling Rice that he is blind to what he has in his wife. And Rice's wife finally leaves him because she does not feel appreciated. In a way, Mr. Rice has been as blind as Molly. Just as Molly regains her sight and her joy in seeing for a brief time, so does Mr. Rice "see" his life clearly for a short time around the moment of Molly's operation.

Molly's husband, Frank, is determined to have Molly regain her sight. He loves her and wants the best for her. But is he able to really "see" Molly, to appreciate who she is and what she risks by changing her life so radically? Is Frank really a sighted person?

When you listen to the story of Molly Sweeney, be alert to the metaphors. What does it mean to be blind? What does it

mean to see? Why do images of flowers keep recurring throughout the play? Why does Mr. Rice's wife describe him as her Icarus? Learning and using your ability to decipher artistic clues will not only enable you to enjoy theatre, movies and television more, it will also sharpen ability to understand politics, games, friendships and your family.